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Citation Details

Donahue, D., & Cress, C.M. (2010). A Community of Scholars Educating for Political Engagement. *Journal for Civic Commitment*, XIV (1), 1-10.

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A Community of Scholars Educating for Political Engagement

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California Campus Compact (CACC) and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching first conceived the Service Learning for Political Engagement Faculty Fellows Program in the autumn of 2006. The idea was to bring together a diverse group of faculty, eventually 23, from across California representing disciplines from engineering and English to agriculture and Asian American studies, from small and large colleges, as well as public, private, and faith-based institutions. These faculty, starting in the summer of 2007, would participate in a two-year effort to define political engagement, explore what their definitions meant for planning service learning projects, and assess their students' learning with an eye towards implications for refining instruction geared towards greater political engagement.

In late 2006 it was not unreasonable to worry that young people were abandoning politics. Voter turnout among college age youth was low. Few young people expressed faith in politicians, political parties, or government in general to address important social problems. At the same time, it was also not unreasonable to wonder if service learning might be contributing to the problem. Did service lead college students to believe that their actions were addressing

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This article was supported in part by Award No. 06LHHCA001, granted by the Corporation for National and Community Service, Learn and Serve America Higher Education through California Campus Compact. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Corporation for National and Community Service, California Campus Compact, or the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

real problems from homelessness to pollution, while the actions of politicians were nothing more than talk, well-intentioned but ineffectual at best, cynical and counter-productive at worst? Certainly young people were not the only ones in the United States disillusioned with politics. But could experiences in college, including service learning, be contributing to their disaffection with politics and their belief that change, or at least the amelioration of social problems, occurred outside of politics? If faculty were failing to think intentionally about how service shapes political learning, were those experiences potentially part of why young people were devaluing and disengaging from politics? Could service learning, framed differently and with forethought to political lessons, promote the political engagement of college students? These questions were foremost when the CACC-Carnegie Service Learning for Political Engagement Faculty Fellows Program was first conceived.

Move from fall 2006 to winter 2007. In the presidential primary season, thousands of college students canvassed, phone banked, and registered voters in early primary states. By fall 2008, young people supported efforts to turn out the vote in key electoral states. Young people also registered and voted in record numbers. While no one would claim service learning accounted for the difference, some might wonder if the original concerns framing the Faculty Fellows Program were still valid. Was it necessary to worry about young people's political disengagement and service learning's role?

The rationale for the project

While the numbers of young people involved in the most recent presidential campaign is encouraging, poll numbers about the public's trust in elected officials are not. Partisan posturing over Supreme Court nominees by U.S. Senators and wrangling between the governor and state legislature in California (among other states) over budgets indicate that the context which initially contributed to young people's disillusionment with politics remains. The ability to compromise and talk across party and ideological differences is rare among elected officials and the public. Many of us can recall our last conversation about politics. For most of us, it was probably recent. But we would likely have more difficulty recalling our last political conversation with others whose beliefs fundamentally differed from our own. Such fragmentation and lack of communication does not contribute to a healthy political environment. Given this situation, preparing young people for political engagement is still as important as ever and service learning can contribute towards that end.

To achieve any valued outcome from service learning, faculty must be intentional. If students are to learn academic content from service, faculty need to provide opportunities for students to reflect on those connections. Experience alone is not enough. Similarly, to promote political engagement, faculty must

provide students with opportunities to learn the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to participate in political life.

Colleges and universities have long claimed for themselves a role in education and preparing young people for democratic participation. At the same time faculty, especially faculty outside disciplines that explicitly address politics, have often been unclear and conflicted about how to accomplish this goal. Service learning faculty have been just as unclear and conflicted. In fact, they may face even more conflicts. For example, faculty working with federal funds are explicitly prohibited from placing students in service where they work for candidates or specific issues. Consequently, while service learning may be seen as one way to promote political involvement, such an aim is missing from many service learning projects because it presents so many philosophical, practical, and pedagogical dilemmas.

The project's goals

The CACC Carnegie Fellows waded squarely into these challenges. Each Fellow was required to develop a new course or revise an existing one to incorporate service learning for political engagement, engage in inquiry into teaching and learning from service learning for political engagement, and share models of service learning for political involvement and findings from their inquiry with scholars across their disciplines and fields. The Fellows' work is in the tradition of the "scholarship of engagement," described by former Carnegie Foundation President, Ernest Boyer (1990), as a way for faculty to bring together their teaching, research, and service roles by treating their teaching and their students' learning as sites for rigorous, scholarly work.

In the first year of the program, Fellows addressed the following questions in their inquiry into developing service learning curricula for political engagement:

- What is political engagement? How is promoting political engagement different from advocating for particular points of view?
- How can we help students see that most service and disciplinary discourse is already political without giving off the perception of "indoctrination"? How can we as teachers effectively share our political views while encouraging open discussion of alternate views?
- How can we make political engagement relevant and meaningful in disciplines which students may believe are "apolitical"?
- How do we encourage apathetic students to establish views in the first place?
- How do we modify an existing community based learning course to make intentional connections to political engagement for students?

- How do we collaborate with community partners to strive towards authentic opportunities for political engagement?
- What are the ways that political discourse opportunities can be identified and who is responsible for pursuing them?

In the second year of the program and into the future, faculty are working to understand what their students have learned from service learning for political engagement and what that learning implies for teaching.

Creating the scholarly community

Fellows have not been doing this work alone. Creating a scholarly community has been key to advancing the Fellows' knowledge and practice. The Fellows' work began with an application asking for their ideas about political engagement and their commitment to checking their own political biases and remaining nonpartisan in their teaching. Shortly after their selection, the Fellows met at a three-day summer institute held at the Carnegie Foundation headquarters. During this time, the Fellows met with Tom Ehrlich and Ann Colby, Senior Scholars at Carnegie's Political Engagement Project, who shared ideas and insights from their book, *Educating for Democracy* (2007). In particular, they discussed the similarities and differences between political and civic education and how political learning requires going beyond the civic engagement and reflection of most service learning in higher education. Colby commented, "Early civic engagement can lead to political engagement, but it does not always happen. Educators need to pay attention to the knowledge, skills, and motivation needed for political engagement and address the gap between volunteering and political involvement."

While the Fellows were left to arrive at their own definition of what qualifies as "political engagement," Ehrlich and Colby reminded Fellows to be explicit with students about their goals for political learning. They stressed the importance of open inquiry and the necessity for faculty to be scrupulously unbiased in preparing young people for political engagement. Ehrlich noted, "Most of us talk with those who agree with us, but this is antithetical to the work of the academy where dialogue across opposing points of view provides more opportunity for learning." He continued, "The problem is not in faculty having biases, but in being unclear about them and not leaving room for students to be critical. Diversity of opinion can come from students, but it can also be hard for them to raise minority points of view." He finished the Fellows' first discussion on political learning by noting that, despite fears of "indoctrinating" students, when faculty pay explicit attention to increasing students' knowledge, skills, and motivation for political engagement, they increase their students' engagement without changing their political perspectives.

During the remainder of the summer institute faculty took advantage of learning from each other and began planning new and revised courses making political engagement an explicit goal. For instance, Alicia Partnoy at Loyola Marymount University integrated service learning into a Hispanic cultural studies course that examined issues of colonization and state-generated violence. Students worked with Latino elders to hear and record stories of discrimination, oppression, and imprisonment. Students examined in new ways political tensions between individual rights and state rights while enhancing their Spanish language skills. Tom Trice, a history professor at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, examined contemporary understandings of democratic principles through the lens of eighteenth and nineteenth century European philosophical concepts of egalitarianism in conjunction with service-learning at a homeless shelter. Other faculty, such as Judy Liu at the University of San Diego required their service-learning students to attend and facilitate non-partisan political education forums on local and state voting initiatives, while faculty in the sciences like Chris Brooks, a computer science professor at the University of San Francisco, included service opportunities such as documenting for the mayor's office whether and how citizens have access to technology through city-run community centers.

Faculty also planned for assessing the impact of their work on students and the community. Over the course of the academic year, Fellows checked in by phone call during the fall and spring and met in three regional groups during the winter to continue discussing the development and implementation of their courses and assessment of students' learning.

The second year of the fellowship brought continued attention to course and service learning project development, this time in light of inquiry into student learning. Fellows used quantitative data from surveys as well as qualitative data from student work and interviews to understand more deeply what students were learning about politics and political engagement. The structure of the second year mirrored the first with a summer institute, check-ins by phone call, and winter regional meetings.

The second year became a time to consider dilemmas inherent in service learning for political engagement. By dilemmas, we mean the kind of tensions that lead to intractable situations that can be managed but never solved. Dilemmas stand in contrast to problems which are often technical in nature and do lend themselves to resolution (Cuban, 2001). So for example, different expectations and understandings by faculty and community partners of service learning outcomes is a common problem in service learning. It can be solved by more opportunities for communication, by putting expectations in writing, by raising and making explicit assumptions that each party brings to the project, by avoiding jargon or language accessible only to those on the same side. By

contrast, responding to a student who wants a local school committee to ban a book from the district presents a dilemma for encouraging political engagement. It is a dilemma because there is no clear solution and any solution involves trade-offs. Allowing the student to complete the project might conflict with others' access to information and freedom of speech. Not allowing the project would conflict with students' freedom of political expression.

Dilemmas require reframing in ways that get us out of these binds. In this case, an actual example shared by one of the Fellows, the student was encouraged to rethink the goals of the project and the school ended up requiring that teachers read and be familiar with all books in their classroom libraries so they can make appropriate recommendations of literature to their students.

Dilemmas of creating a scholarly community

Our work facilitating a scholarly community focused on service learning for political engagement has been as thought-provoking as it has been rewarding. Just as the Fellows have discovered that service learning for political engagement raises practical and theoretical dilemmas, so too, we have found that bringing together and facilitating a scholarly community raises its own set of dilemmas. Some of the questions we have considered include: Should the community be open to anyone interested regardless of experience with service learning? How do we draw on the diverse experiences and backgrounds of the Fellows? How do we collaborate when Fellows operate with different definitions of what is political?

We decided that the Fellows should be a group of experienced service learning practitioners. While we know that this decision might have excluded some new practitioners who would be drawn by the angle of learning for political engagement, we also knew that supporting faculty in their learning about political engagement and service learning would diffuse our focus and spread resources too widely. We chose to require service learning experience because service learning carries its own set of dilemmas and problems of practice even without focusing on political engagement. We wanted the focus of inquiry and collaboration to be on the political dimension of learning from service, not the broader questions of learning from service more generally. We also know that just as our students' learning is developmental and socially constructed, so is faculty learning. By creating a group where everyone is familiar with service learning, we hoped to push our knowledge of political learning from service and do so in a context where a similarly solid basis of knowledge about learning from service was shared by all.

While a group of 23 faculty representing a wide range of disciplines, various kinds of colleges and universities, and equally diverse settings could be seen by some as a challenge to creating community, we decided to use this

diversity as an advantage in framing community. We were not alone in seeing such advantage. Very quickly into the projects, faculty came to see that they had much more in common than not and that their differences were generative for rethinking practice. Seeing the value of this diversity is not surprising. Public problems, like those addressed by the service learning projects for political engagement, are rarely unpacked solely with the perspectives of experts in engineering, English, or even political science. Instead, they usually require knowledge of science, skill at reading and writing, and understanding of political processes. Fellows valued cross-disciplinary perspectives in thinking about service learning, political engagement, and teaching.

While Fellows valued collaboration across disciplines, types of institutions, and geographic location, we also created spaces for Fellows with similar affinities to work together. Summer institutes regularly included time for Fellows to work with others in their discipline and with others in the same region. As a result, sociology faculty worked together to share data from their inquiries and presented their work at the Pacific Sociological Association. Fellows in the Bay Area shared information about resources and events to support learning for democratic engagement. Informally, Fellows shared strategies and challenges for working in similar environments, e.g., religious institutions where some political topics might be out of bounds, campuses where one political view dominates over others, rural environments where service learning placements or other resources might be more spread out.

Holding different definitions of what counts as political could have posed a roadblock to collaboration. Indeed, all of us in academia know that one sure way to slow down or stop any effort is to ask participants to define their terms. We agreed to let Fellows operate with multiple definitions. Some chose to define any decision making process involving the distribution of power as political. Others defined political in the context of broad democratic participation in communities. Still others believed that any definition of political in service learning needed to include a direct and explicit connection to political processes such as voting or developing public policy. In the end, sharing these varying definitions of political broadened everyone's perspective and provided new ideas for deepening students' understanding of the multitude of ways that service and learning from service is political.

Next steps

We are appropriately humble and cautiously optimistic about finding responses to the question raised at the beginning of this article--can service learning contribute to college students' political engagement? We are appropriately humble because we do not want to overstate the effect of any single activity such as service learning to achieve a single outcome, particularly

one as complex as increasing political motivation and involvement. At the same time, we see service learning that is geared intentionally towards political engagement as a useful strategy towards that end. Our optimism comes from preliminary pre- and post-project data from some of the Fellow's inquiries into student learning indicate increases in political knowledge, efficacy, and commitment. The caution tempers our optimism because such data relies on self-reporting from students and because we lack longitudinal evidence. Given these cautions, the Fellows' project has supported a focus on inquiry into teaching about political engagement and shaped how this group of faculty frame reflection on service for students. Bringing a political lens to reflection on service is a starting point for using service learning to promote greater political engagement. Indeed, one of the key understandings for faculty from this project is that service alone cannot promote political engagement but the way reflection on that service is framed has such potential.

As the Fellows move forward, even after the formal end of the project, they are examining the dilemmas inherent in teaching for democratic participation, including teaching through service learning. What if a student's idea for a service learning project is antithetical to a faculty member's ideas of participation in a democratic society? What if students in a classroom find it difficult to accommodate an unpopular point of view or one artlessly expressed? What if students propose service in the form of educating citizens but find no one wants to be their students? As the Fellows are learning, these dilemmas are not obstacles to preparing young people for political engagement, but the very curriculum for developing such engagement. Such an understanding that dilemmas are the text for learning rather than obstacles to it is perhaps one of the greatest changes in thinking for faculty involved in the Fellows project. By acknowledging these dilemmas, they and their students are broadening our understanding of how to teach for political engagement. And by sharing these dilemmas with others in their academic disciplines and faculty on their campuses, they are expanding the community of scholars engaged in preparing young people for political life.

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